The Momo Challenge: A digital ghost story

April 25 2019, by Andrew Merrington

Andy Phippen, Professor of Social Responsibility in IT, at the University of Plymouth, and Emma Bond, Professor of Socio-Technical Research, at the University of Suffolk, have worked together to analyse the 'hysteria' that surrounded the Momo Challenge, earlier this year. Here, they summarise the factors that caused a "near perfect storm" and look at the lessons that society is failing to learn.

In February of this year, the UK underwent what might be termed a moment of 'Momo-induced moral panic' across social media and traditional news channels. The Momo Challenge, as it was labelled, was a phenomenon where a disturbing image of a face would suddenly appear in otherwise innocuous online content – most notably Peppa Pig videos. It was alleged that the image (in actual fact, a photograph of a sculpture of a Japanese ubume, or spirit) would speak to the viewer, directing them to contact a mobile phone number, where they would be set a series of challenges that could involve self-harm or even suicide.

The triggers for this Momo-mania were two-fold. The first was a press release issued by the Police Service of Northern Ireland on the 25 February. Despite the fact that it had not received a single official complaint or report about Momo, and that by its own admission there was no evidence that the challenge even existed, the PSNI felt that media and online "hype" was sufficient for it to take a public stand against the 'threat' it posed to children, and voice its moral disgust.

While this media release was undoubtedly well intended, it effectively legitimised the hype that had been largely generated by tabloid reporting.

And it triggered a near perfect storm of additional news coverage, celebrity social media commentary and advice from online safety organisations, many of whom jostled to become the main player in 'solving' a crisis that in reality didn't exist. In particular, commentary from celebrities such as Kim Kardashian West via social media greatly amplified the story. Naturally, parents concerned for their children's welfare propagated it further, and by the end of the week, there had been nearly 35,000 internet searches for 'momo' – an increase on the previous seven days of 45,000%.

Momo is what we might term a digital ghost story, a modern-day equivalent of the traditional tales of the supernatural that were passed on via word of mouth and embellished with each retelling.

It's not the first time that we've seen a media storm whipped up in relation to one – the Blue Whale Challenge of a few years before had an identical modus operandi and was also proven to be unfounded. Similarly, Doki Doki Literature Club, an interactive video game with horror and upsetting story threads, was cited by a coroner as being linked to the tragic suicide of teenager Ben Walmsley in 2016. This prompted various police forces to issue alerts to their local schools, which consequently reached parents via social media. But when you analyse the data, the game has been downloaded more than two million times, and there is no evidence to conclude that it is influencing or has influenced behaviour – and to imply causation, in this case, was irresponsible.

In all three cases the spread of 'awareness' was virtually identical: initial media reporting; comment from 'responsible' bodies; social media amplification; public outcry; then finally, rational comment in order to quell the hysteria. So we are seeing history repeating itself, and this raises important questions as to why authorities and society, in general, are failing to learn the lessons of the past. Indeed, why are they not even heeding the accepted advice that has underpinned safeguarding training

for more than a decade?

The first thing that is apparent is the need for news outlets and 'responsible' bodies to more thoroughly examine the credibility of 'evidence' in a critical manner when these stories first emerge. Momo was not the first digital ghost story to claim responsibility for suicides in far off locations, but in the absence of inquests and coroners reports, where is the proof that they occurred? Why is it that these apparently global phenomena seem to originate in remote locations and developing countries where their provenance is obscured and validity uncontested?

The second key point, is that while the concept of the Momo Challenge as an organised operation aiming to get children to self-harm or commit suicide is entirely fake, it is nevertheless true that online trolls and meme creators have been willing to inject upsetting imagery and dialogue into children's videos, whether for their own gain, increased profile, or simply out of mischief. Children will react to digital ghost stories and other harmful content in different ways, but it is vital that all of them know that if they see such content, they can inform an adult and not get into any trouble for it. And the adults responsible for their care shouldn't be the ones pointing them in the direction of this harmful content then telling them not to search for it!

This is particularly true of schools and educational institutions. In our research we learned of one primary school where the head teacher called an assembly specifically to warn his pupils about Momo, and then said they were not to search for it. We need to be mindful that in our rush to "save" one child who might be at risk from online harm we increase the likelihood of exposing thousands of others to that same potential harm. While many will be resilient and able to contextualise the content, the concern is for those who are "vulnerable" may not able to assimilate and who might even act on the information.

There has been much discussion around "critical digital literacy" for children and young people in recent years, but the Momo event signals the need for more effective training for those in the children's workforce. At the moment, stakeholders in child online safeguarding are still failing children and, in some cases, putting their own recognition ahead of ensuring there is a responsible and balanced response.

The Internet has some dark corners with unpleasant and risky content; do we really need to drive children to it, especially those already vulnerable to this type of content? We must do better than that.

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